

More (and better?) jobs for women?: the
Employment Task-force report and gender
mainstreaming

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The Employment Taskforce report is concerned with creating more employment for Europe. The report takes it as axiomatic that this must involve more jobs for women. The issues are not thus whether women's employment should be encouraged but how best to ensure both an adequate supply of jobs and that women are not being prevented from taking up jobs as they become available. But a policy of more jobs is not sufficient; more jobs must also mean better jobs, particularly for women. The Employment Taskforce report has followed the EES in continuing to embrace the principle of equal opportunities in employment and in recognising the central role that women's employment is playing within the EES. These features of the report are very much to be welcomed. However, the argument to be made here is that the twin objectives of more jobs for Europe and the promotion of gender equality could be better assured if there was a more systematic gender mainstreaming of the policy analysis and policy prescriptions throughout the report.

Gender mainstreaming serves two functions: firstly, it improves the productivity and effectiveness of the employment strategies and the associated policy programmes; and secondly it promotes gender equality by introducing a gender perspective into the design, implementation and evaluation of policies. While progress has been made under the European Employment Strategy and within the Employment Task-force in pursuing both these objectives, there is still a need for a more comprehensive and integrated approach.

The objectives of the Employment Taskforce are to change the ways in which work and employment are organised in the European economy; on this basis there is a need to consider the key roles that men and women occupy within both the current systems and the process of change. Such a consideration of the specificity of current gender roles could contribute to the diagnosis of problems and development of policy.

This contribution can be illustrated first with respect to the issue of *adaptability*. Women currently provide in most countries a disproportionate share of the labour force for flexible forms of work such as part-time and temporary work, and are particularly more likely to occupy such positions during their prime working age and not only, as in the case of men, at the beginning or end of their careers. If a key plank of the strategy is to increase flexibility, it needs to be clarified if the intention is to spread non standard working outside of these groups or to use these forms of employment to promote employment among inactive women, unemployed young people and early retired older workers. The labour supply aspects of extending forms of non standard working- including the implied sources of additional income support, from families, state benefits or pensions - need to be addressed.

When we look at the second issue of *attracting more people to the labour market*, we again find the issue to be one that primarily concerns women; according to the recent OECD Employment Outlook for 2003 women account for 71% of mobilisable additional labour supplies in 26 OECD countries, with

the inactive accounting for 92% of the potential supplies and the unemployed just 8%. However, while women are a potential labour supply, they also face particular kinds of traps; these can be considered to be

- low pay traps (women enter into low paid work and are unable to find paths out into higher paid work and may indeed fall back into inactivity as low paid jobs are unstable or not worth holding on to when family crises erupt);
- inactivity or part-time traps (women are affected by household-based tax system, benefit systems and by childcare costs, as they are normally the second earner in the household and the problem of excessive marginal tax rates-including here benefit withdrawal and childcare costs- tend to fall on women's earnings);
- time traps (women are still expected to take the main responsibility for family life; this causes pressures of fitting full-time jobs with domestic work or of juggling the flexible scheduling that often goes along with part-time jobs with inflexible childcare arrangements and the variable and long schedules of their partners)

The discussion on the employment rate for older workers proceeds on the assumption that it is primarily related to a problem of early retirement, yet it is women's low employment rate that contributes most to the overall low employment rate for this group (for not only is their employment rate lower but also the gap between the average employment rate and the older workers' rate is wider for women than men). Moreover, the cause of women's low employment lies as much or more in the problem of never returning to the labour market as in early retirement. Women's employment has also grown faster in this age group over recent years as a consequence of a higher rate of return or continuity. Without a gender perspective it is not possible to identify either the full underlying problems or to understand the trends in the performance indicators.

The third focus of the report is the need to *invest more in human capital*. One perhaps surprising feature of recent years has been the widespread assumption that it is perfectly normal for the education of girls to be given as high a priority as that of boys and indeed for girls to begin both outperform boys in education and to invest more in their education, through higher participation rates in universities. This equality in the education field has yet to be followed through in the employment field. There is almost no debate about what changes need to be made to the employment systems in order to ensure that best use is made of the new supplies of educated labour. There are major questions to be asked about what changes are needed in work organisation and career structures in order to ensure both the full utilisation and the full development of women's skills, as initial training at university is only the start of the development of the knowledge economy. If these changes are not made, then problems of retention of skilled female labour may occur, not only because of the direct problems of managing work and family life over the period of childbirth but because of dominant male workplace cultures. Much of the focus on lifelong learning also fails to recognise that many people – particularly women- are outside the labour force but still have skills that need updating and developing if there is to be a real chance of developing a knowledge economy.

Thus, in each of the three main areas, a gender perspective would contribute to the understanding of the key issues for policy and in the design of effective programmes. Yet there is an equal and perhaps even more imperative need to mainstream gender equality, as an objective in its own right, into the strategies proposed. Gender mainstreaming is not just about assisting and promoting a predetermined strategy but about identifying any conflicts within the proposed programme with the goal of gender equality and thereby lead to the design of a strategy that can help serve both objectives. It may be that at times other objectives are given priority over that of gender equality, but the aim of gender mainstreaming is to make those choices explicit and to highlight where potential conflicts or trade-offs exist.

To understand the gender equality issue posed by the various policies it is necessary to identify the key areas of gender difference with respect to employment. In brief shorthand these can be considered to include:

- A lower rate of integration of women into the wage economy and a greater risk of discontinuity of employment
- Different and stronger time constraints on women
- Lower access to resources for women, particularly to earned income due to more discontinuous employment, shorter hours of work, lower pay and more limited pension entitlements,
- Greater exposure of women to discrimination at the workplace, associated with patterns of occupational and hierarchical segregation, gender differences in employment contracts/job security and male-dominated workplace cultures, including issues of sexual harassment
- Greater sensitivity of women's economic status to their household and family position- such that it is women's earnings that are often subject to the high marginal tax rates associated with household-based tax and benefit systems or even to the cost of childcare. Moreover women's risk of poverty is related to the risk of family break up.

To illustrate the utility of this approach we identify under each of these dimensions some areas of concern within the Employment taskforce analysis or proposed strategy.

Integration/ continuity of employment

A gender mainstreaming approach would suggest the need for a focus on the inactive and on returners to the labour market as much if not more than the unemployed. Instead the task-force report seems to prioritise the unemployed- by, for example, calling for policies to ensure that in a recession that those who become unemployed remain closely attached to the labour market with no reference to parallel policies to help the inactive who might have expected to return to work during this recessionary period. This hidden unemployment needs to be addressed directly through extending access to active labour market programmes to the inactive who want to work. Where the inactive are explicitly mentioned, this is mainly in respect of those claiming benefits for disability or sickness.

Another issue that is touched upon but not fully analysed is the role that career breaks or extended parental leave can play in reconciling work and family life on the one hand but maintaining attachment to the labour market on the other hand. The OECD Employment Outlook for 2003 points to the double-edged nature of extended leaves, where the impact can be to reduce attachment to the labour market except in the context of a fully developed policy of reconciliation including childcare provision.

‘(...) the opportunity to take paid maternity leave may increase women’s attachment to the labour market. But extended leave is likely to make more difficult and uncertain the return to employment, especially for women with insecure employment status. Female labour supply is relatively sensitive to childcare costs, particularly for women with low skills and low pay.’ (OECD 2003:115).

Extended leaves are also difficult to reconcile with moves towards new forms of flexibility, based on greater mobility between jobs and employers; how extended leave rights can be granted under such a system needs to be addressed.

Time

A gender mainstreaming perspective requires attention to be paid both to women’s current apparent needs for greater time flexibility but also to men’s behaviour, with a view to promoting men’s active involvement in family life and changing the long hours culture in men’s jobs that is a cause of gender segregation at work. A further concern must be whether the promotion of time flexibility will intensify gender segregation at work and thereby perhaps lead to lower rather than higher job quality.

The Taskforce report is in some sense aware of these problems as it stresses the need for flexibility arrangements to seek to meet both employers and employees needs. Indeed mutually beneficial solutions are said to be available, once actors discard old preconceptions. However, there is no identification of the preconditions for the development of mutually beneficial solutions; where these are negotiated at the workplace level, it could be that male workers would be happy to accept new arrangements that would make reconciliation less rather than more possible, thereby intensifying gender segregation. Mutually-beneficial solutions may be a theoretical possibility but there is limited evidence that they will result out of unregulated voluntary negotiations.

Resources

Gender equality is not only about access to work but also about rewards from work. In the Task-force report there is no real reconciliation between the policies to close the gender pay gap and the policies to promote employment-friendly wage policies and sectoral pay variations. The latter are likely to be linked to the size of the gender pay gap. The recent 2003 Employment in Europe report provides detailed evidence of wide variations in sectoral wage structures across EU countries; what level of variation is necessary for productivity reasons and what part of the differentiation is related to different

degrees of gender discrimination in pay is not addressed in the report. There is also no direct reference to the role of part-time work in women's access to pay: the Employment in Europe report found that the part-time premium is negative for lower paid workers but positive for higher paid workers. Thus part-time work may intensify inequalities for low paid groups.

Moreover, the pension reforms aimed at reducing incentives for early retirement are not necessarily taking into account the gender equality effects of extending contribution years or averaging entitlements over the whole lifetime of employment, as it is women who have both interrupted careers and a tendency towards part-time work.

Discrimination

The EU has a set of hard law measures to promote gender equality at work, including the promotion of access to employment irrespective of traditional patterns of segregation. The Taskforce report does not address the issue of discrimination and segregation directly but there are potential dangers implicit in some of their proposals and identified best practices. For example, in chapter 2 there is a question mark posed over the benefit of recruitment formalities. Now, while equal opportunity policy in recruitment was probably not the issue that the Taskforce had in mind, there is a need to consider the impact on equal opportunity policy of promoting a move to informal methods. Furthermore, policies to promote mini-jobs or part-time jobs may create new areas of segregation. Some may argue that this may still be worthwhile if they act as stepping stones to better employment, but the consequences for segregation need to be noted and the stepping stones claim supported through empirical studies.

Household/family position

One of the major planks of the policy approach is to make work pay for all, for women as well as men. The extension of make work pay policies to women is complicated by the various kinds of traps that women are embedded in, due to their household and their labour market position. The Taskforce noted the negative impact of household-based taxation system but has not recognised the extension and intensification of this effects for women in households in receipt of employment conditional benefits, where these are household based. These problems have been highlighted this year by the OECD:

'Basing the benefit on overall household income may reduce the incentive for the spouse to work and such a risk may be crucial in those countries where non-employment is concentrated among spouses. However, this perverse effect may be attenuated when eligibility requirements are individually based... 'in both the United Kingdom and the United States, tax credits appear to be an effective means of encouraging entry or a return to employment by lone parents families and households where no-one works. But there is also evidence of the perverse effect that is expected among two-earner households with regard to the labour supply of spouses.' (OECD 2003:118).

To conclude, the Employment Task-force report certainly reflects the higher profile of gender equality that has emerged under the European Employment Strategy, boosted first of all by the equal opportunities pillar and the gender

mainstreaming guideline, and later by the specific female employment rate targets and the childcare targets. While the visibility of equal opportunities has diminished with the new EES guidelines and the disappearance of the separate pillar, the profile has in part been maintained by the commitment to closing gender gaps. However, the report also reflects the weakness of the EES where gender equality is still not fully mainstreamed and gender equality policies remain piecemeal and often unspecific. In the Taskforce report gender equality issues occur in most chapters but they are treated more as a stand alone issues rather than mainstreamed through analyses of key gender dimensions of difference. Perhaps, even more worryingly, in the EES and here in the Taskforce report, gender issues are identified more in relation to their contribution to the employment goals than as a means of promoting gender equality per se.